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ABSTRACT

This document addresses the problem of students withdrawing from courses before completion and in the process attempts to devise ways that Mendocino College can aid students complete their courses. The report uses findings from two research reports. The first report was completed at the Florida Community College (FCC), which discovered that 75% of students that withdrew classes did so due to family obligations, employment responsibilities, work related travel, personal or family illness, or other changes in personal lives. The other study was completed at the Santa Ana College (SAC), which cited that the most common cause for withdrawal was time conflict with work, family or personal problems, and dissatisfaction with instruction or academic progress. Findings from other studies have found that minority students tend to withdraw more often (41%) than the overall average (17.5%). Certain areas tend to have more withdrawals than other areas. The disciplines with withdrawal rates over 35% are: Black Studies, Catering, Chicano Studies, Education, etc. The most likely explanation for this is that students are interested in the course topic, but unable to meet the academic challenges of the class. The document concludes with institutional strategies that will increase course completion and teacher practices that will help students to complete courses. (Contains 11 references.) (MZ)

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Student Withdrawal Study

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2003

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1

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Research Question: Why do students enroll in classes and then withdraw? Is there anything that Mendocino College can do to encourage more students to complete their classes?

Dropouts, stop-outs, and non-completers – these terms describe patterns of student behavior that have raised much concern among educators. While there is the potential for overlap between each of these terms, there are important distinctions, as well. A dropout is an individual who permanently ceases to attend school. A stop-out is a student who ceases to attend school, but who also intends to re-enroll at a point in the not-too-distant future. Finally, a non-completer is a student who enrolls in a course, but fails to complete the course. This last category of student behavior includes enrolling but failing to attend any classes at all, attending a few classes and then simply stopping attendance, and formally petitioning for withdrawal.

This paper will concentrate on the characteristics of students who withdraw from courses early, before they have completed the class for a grade. Of primary interest are the reasons that students feel the need to withdraw. I will review the research that has been done on student withdrawal. Also, I will present some information from relevant studies of student dropouts and stop-outs.

It appears that one cause of student withdrawal is a gap between expectations and reality (Kerka, 1995). Perceptions of a lack of progress may frustrate students early in the semester. Frequently, they are not given enough information before enrollment to know when to expect development and what they must do to achieve it (Hamann 1994). Students who withdraw are motivated to enroll in educational programs (Quigley 1995), but their negative past experiences with school may predispose them to perceive lack of immediate progress as failure. Some students may have a history with culturally insensitive teachers or racism, or they may have been labeled as failures in the past. These concerns are amenable to intervention by the college. Student expectations can be shaped by orientation sessions and by course syllabi. Teachers can be trained to heighten their cultural sensitivity.

A mismatch between expectations and reality may influence some students to withdraw from class. However, research indicates that the majority of students who withdraw early do so for "practical reasons". Researchers at the Florida Community College (FCC) in Jacksonville studied a group of distance-learning continuing education students in an effort to understand what factors were related to class withdrawal. They found that, in the vast majority of cases, there is little that could have prevented student withdrawal. Seventy-five percent of students who withdrew from FCC's distance learning courses cited **family obligations, employment responsibilities, work-related travel, personal or family illness, or other changes in their personal lives as the reason for the withdrawal**. The remaining 25% of these students said that the testing schedules were inconvenient or that the "pace" of the course was inappropriate (too fast, too slow, too hard, too easy). A final point from that study was that the majority (77%) of the withdrawing students said that they would enroll in a distance-learning class again.

Although the FCC study was done in a different state and at a different college, its results are probably quite applicable to MC. Research with Santa Ana College (SAC) students indicates that many of the reasons that were uncovered in the Florida study resonate with Californian

students. A recent survey of SAC students who did not return in the next semester found that students left school for a variety of reasons, the most common of which were: **time conflict with work; family or personal problems; and dissatisfaction with instruction or academic progress** (RSCCD, 2000). The reasons that these SAC students gave are quite similar to those of the students in the FCC study. Among these reasons for withdrawal, economic factors seem to exert a strong influence. A study of SAC Vocational students indicates that economically disadvantaged students have a much lower rate of course completion (69%) than the overall average (82.5%).

The timing of withdrawal is another area that has drawn the attention of researchers. Dirkhx and Jha (1994) found that the majority of students who do not complete a course attend less than 12 hours of instruction. This finding, and others, underscores the importance of the first few weeks of class. Quigley (1995) found that those who drop out after the first few weeks were younger than persisters and were also loners who felt they did not receive enough teacher attention. Kambouri and Francis (1994) reported that most leavers stayed only 2-3 weeks, and Malicky and Norman (1994) also found the highest attrition rates occurred early in the program.

Because one of the reasons that student give for dropping out and withdrawing is that the pace of a class is too fast or that they are not making satisfactory academic progress, it is likely that more demanding and rigorous classes will show higher levels of student withdrawal. Some classes in particular are notorious for attracting students who find the topic interesting, who then find that their academic skills are not strong enough to allow them to succeed in the class, and thus they choose to withdraw (e.g., courses in Black Studies, Education, and Social Science). Not all withdrawals are perceived by students as negative, however. Several studies show that noncompleters sometimes leave when they feel their goals were realized, and their goals may be simply knowledge or skill acquisition -- not course credit or a grade (Kambouri and Francis 1994; Perin and Greenberg 1994).

Again, looking at Santa Ana College we can see that although the overall withdrawal rate in 2000 was 17%, some courses had much higher rates of withdrawal. Those disciplines with withdrawal rates of over 35% are: Black Studies, Catering, Chicano Studies, Education, Exercise Science – Activities, Pharmacy Technology, Science, and Social Science. These classes may be attracting students who are interested in the subject matter, but who are not prepared to meet the demands of the course work.

Many students at community college must cope with multiple roles and responsibilities while simultaneously pursuing their educational goals; many may have had negative past experiences of school or may lack confidence in their academic ability; many students face financial difficulties, employment and child care conflicts, or opposition to their continuing education from significant others. Increased awareness of these issues and of the constraints that face students is the first step to improving student success.

Risk Factors for Early Withdrawal

The following lists summarize the major factors that have been noted as being associated with higher rates of early withdrawal from classes.

Personal Factors

- Low self-esteem
- A lack of demonstrable progress
- Pressures from work and home (e.g., problems scheduling childcare and transportation)
- Lack of support for education from the native culture and/or the family culture
- The age of the learner (older students are less likely to complete a course)
- Feelings of alienation, lack of involvement in college community
- Poverty
- Part-time study

Program Factors

- Lack of opportunity to achieve success
- Lack of flexibility in class scheduling
- Lack of peer support and reinforcement
- Instructional material that is not relevant to students' needs and lives

Institutional Strategies to Increase Student Course Completion

Literally dozens of intervention programs have shown that certain practices will increase student involvement with their student role and thereby increase positive academic outcomes for students who are at high risk for early withdrawal. The main strategies of these programs are summarized below (Kerka, 1995).

- Comprehensive strategies targeted for specific subpopulations; involving students in multiple aspects of the college community; culturally sensitive counseling and support services.
- A curriculum that is based on the student's culture; material that is developmentally appropriate.
- Provide opportunities to succeed at something in every class meeting, including the first, no matter how small or simple.
- Provide alternative arenas for success that enable learners to display competence in other areas (e.g., meals prepared by learners; ESL students helping native-English students to learn another language).
- Pre-enrollment counseling to establish expectations and to give a sense of the college community.
- A vision from the top level of the school that student concerns are important; a staff that is willing to listen to student concerns.
- Personal attention; treating students as individuals; recognizing anxiety about school.
- Assistance with personal and financial problems.
- Mentoring students (teacher and peer mentoring).
- Flexible, convenient scheduling of classes and exams.
- Promote frequent contact with faculty (including electronic methods).
- Establish an "early warning system" that alerts teachers and counselors to gaps in the academic performance of students.
- Improved academic advisement, enhanced communication between faculty and students.

Strategies to improve student course completion can be broadly categorized as either orientation programs or mentoring programs. Programs that combine aspects of both categories may have a better chance of success.

Orientation programs are a common intervention strategy. They provide students with information essential to their academic socialization, such as: 1) descriptions of college program offerings; 2) the college's expectations for students; 3) information about assistance and services for examining interests, values, and abilities; 4) encouragement to establish working relationships with faculty; 5) information about services that help with adjustment to college; and 6) financial aid information.

Another strategy successfully used by some community colleges is peer and faculty mentoring. Mentoring improves teacher-student interaction in the classroom and increases student retention by reducing feelings of alienation and by increasing student confidence, interest, and motivation. Peer mentoring programs also have been found to be effective in retaining students. Peer mentors act as role models, provide social and academic support, encourage students to think critically, and assist them with academic choices.

Teacher Practices that Help Students to Complete Courses

The following suggestions were culled from The Retention Strategies Manual (1987), which is a compilation of "best practices". The California Association of Community Colleges identified teachers with high retention rates and asked for brief descriptions of their practices and insights. Several practices and themes emerged, including the following:

- Frequent assessment. (e.g., quizzes and homework should be assigned frequently).
- Allow for partial credit.
- Draw parallels between class material and the students' experiences and lives.
- Allow for make-up exams; be compassionate and flexible.
- Be aware that students have significant responsibilities and pressures outside of class.
- Be aware of the academic support services and counseling programs that are available to students. Many students are not themselves aware of these programs and find such assistance invaluable once connected to the support structure.
- Get to know your students on a personal level. Give plenty of personal attention.
- Talk to students privately if they have missed two classes or an assignment.
- Have clear goals and expectations for the class and articulate those goals for the students.
- Give occasional pep talks.
- Let students know that you care about their success.
- Encourage positive thinking. Tell the students that you know they can do the work.
- Have high expectations.
- Make the class interesting by using current events to illustrate points.
- Be respectful and polite to students.
- Learn students' names.
- Connect success in the course to success in the "real world".
- Take students' personal emergencies seriously.
- Keep class material fresh, for your own interest as much as theirs.
- Be proactive. Recognize the signs that a student is struggling with the material (e.g., failing to complete work, absences, leaving a notebook behind, etc.) and then encourage the student to complete the course and to use available academic support services and counseling.

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